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EPA facing funding shortfall

Less money will mean less homes cleaned in coming year

By BRENT SHRUM

Western News Reporter

The extent of EPA cleanup work in Libby next year will depend on the outcome of ongoing funding negotiations between the local project manager and agency headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Earlier this fall, project manager Jim Christiansen believed he was set to receive the full \$19 million he had requested for the new fiscal year, which started Oct. 1. Christiansen has since learned that \$2 million in additional funding he received last summer was considered by headquarters as an advance against the next year and will be deducted from 2004 funds.

Christiansen has already received \$5

million that will fund work through January or February. If funding for the remainder of the year comes in below Christiansen's original expectations, some cutbacks will have to be made when work ramps up in the spring and summer.

"In a nutshell, we just won't be able to plow through properties as quickly as I'd like to next summer if I don't get what I asked for," Christiansen said.

With less money than Christiansen budgeted, fewer properties would be cleaned and there would be less flexibility to deal with the unexpected.

"That's a big one, because things pop up in Libby all the time," Christiansen said.

When crews unearthed asbestos-cont-

aminated vermiculite while building a new boat ramp at the city's Riverside Park, work stopped and an EPA cleanup project began soon after. The job will cost around \$500,000, Christiansen said.

"That's 10 houses I don't do," he said.

EPA Superfund program administrator Mike Cook will travel to Denver on Monday to discuss the funding situation with Christiansen. Christiansen said he hopes to be able to persuade his boss that the Libby project needs the additional money.

Recent occurrences of mesothelioma – a rare and deadly cancer closely tied to asbestos exposure – in Libby-area

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residents who never worked at the vermiculite mine or processing facilities underscore the need for a thorough cleanup, said Dr. Brad Black, medical director of the Center for Asbestos Related Disease.

While mesothelioma is much less common than asbestos-related fibrosis, it appears that relatively low-level exposures can trigger the disease, Black said.

Exposure to the amphibole

asbestos found as a contaminate in the vermiculite mined near Libby is believed to be more likely to result in mesothelioma than exposure to the more common chrysotile asbestos used in commercial applications. A study commissioned by W.R. Grace in the 1980s showed mesothelioma occurring among vermiculite miners at a rate 10 times higher than that among chrysotile miners, Black said.

Mesothelioma cases in the Libby area have averaged about one per year over the last 25

years, which far exceeds national averages.

"It's very important that we do a good job cleaning these areas where vermiculite can spill into homes," Black said.

U.S. Sen. Max Baucus has expressed support for the Libby cleanup and made his support for newly confirmed EPA administrator Mike Leavitt contingent on Libby remaining a top priority for the agency.

Libby residents are concerned that the agency is shifting its attention to projects in other

parts of the country and that the cleanup will drag on, Baucus told Leavitt in an Oct. 28 letter.

"Libby could and should be a positive example of the EPA's ability to work with local communities to protect the health and well-being of this country's citizens," Baucus wrote. "I ask you work with me to ensure that Libby receives all the funding needed to maintain momentum on all aspects of the cleanup. Libby needs to move on. A completed cleanup is this community's ticket to achieve that goal."